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THE ‘USES OF LITERACY’ REVISITED IN THE MULTIMEDIA AGE

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“Come forth into the light of *things*...”¹

Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* was published in 1957: exactly fifty years ago. It was an intellectual response to the challenge of mass media and it was also a popular bestseller in its own right. It set the agenda for a generation’s educational and disciplinary reform.

Since the 1950s, the communications and entertainment media have grown to unprecedented power and pervasiveness. These media have also been at the forefront of revolutions in information, technological acceleration, consumerism and globalisation. If we do live in a commercial but humane democracy, as Hoggart fervently hoped that we would, the popular media are a chief means for interconnecting both the human and the democratic parts of society, and for linking expert elites in government, business and the professions with the general population.

One part of the promise of popular media – often bitterly disappointed but forever resurgent – is that they will progressively strengthen that link. Despite their corporate power, the hope is that the gap between professional elites and the public at large can be bridged by democratised media.

Half a century after Hoggart, the time has surely come for a new attempt to be made to understand these forces in relation to the *uses* to which both lay populations and

¹ William Wordsworth, ‘The tables turned,’ 1798. See <http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww134.html>

expert elites put their 'media literacy.' I would argue that the most important change is not in technology, incredible though that has been, going through both the television and the internet generations since 1957. In my view, of more long-term importance is the change among those who at that time could 'only stand and stare' – the audience. The important change since Hoggart's day is the extent to which media literacy has evolved from 'read-only' (broadcast, one-to-many) to 'read and write' (interactive, peer-to-peer).

Early media theorists compared broadcasting to the pulpit or soap-box, where a single message was shouted from the perspective of some vested interest. The role of the populace was to sit around and passively soak it up. They were the object of media messages, not the subject. However, in the last few years and at gathering pace, non-professionals have taken up these media as an autonomous means of communication for themselves. 'Writing' is catching up with 'reading.'

Now commentators are remarking on the extent to which users and consumers are leading the way in finding innovative uses for interactive media. Teenagers invented SMS texting, users built Linux and the open source movement, fans make YouTube videos and co-create computer games, whole communities play 'massive multi-user games,' citizens practice DIY online journalism, bloggers and other amateurs produce billions of pages of new information and ideas on the web, millions of consumers populate social networks like MySpace, Bebo and Facebook with their own creative content, and we all write the Wikipedia. People are making and sharing their own digital stories. Increasingly, technology is migrating out of organisations and even homes; now we're using mobile devices to 'read and write.'

The long-cherished divide between professional and amateur is blurring. Non-professionals can have a bigger public impact than corporate producers. Consider the political effect of the amateur photos taken inside Abu Ghraib Prison, for example, or the newsworthiness of the mobile-phone pictures taken of the bombings in the London Underground by fellow-passengers, not to mention the commercial success of self-made media on YouTube. Institutions are learning from individuals – ‘serious games’ techniques are used to train medical and military personnel, deploying insights, techniques and formats gained from consumers. Social networks are rapidly evolving into major global markets, in which fans and consumers themselves can become the next wave of innovative entrepreneurs.

Here media literacy is actually following print literacy, although changes are happening at a faster rate. In the early modern period the use of reading spread well before that of writing, just as we’ve learnt how to be audiences before becoming makers of media. Read-only literacy was a ‘social technology’ controlled by priests, princes and others with instrumental purposes. Two developments were needed to unleash the full potential of print-literacy. First, a ‘reading public’ of imagined co-subjects (what we now call a social network). Second, non-purposeful uses of literacy (which is what interested Hoggart). It was only after a literarily connected reading public began to write, on a peer-to-peer basis and not under license of authority, that western society produced the Enlightenment (rational philosophy and scientific method), the Industrial Revolution (‘useful’ knowledge), and democracy (‘knowledge is power’).

Print literacy also enabled the entirely unplanned evolution of the two great realist textual systems of modernity, journalism and the novel. But it was only when the popular

classes were politically enfranchised in the nineteenth century that social reformers realised what a friend they had in print-literacy, and so began the long haul to invest in it sufficiently for everyone to be a participant (whether they liked it or not); hence universal (compulsory) schooling, free libraries, the 'pauper press,' popular literature and eventually mass higher education. What was the return on this investment? Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* was an attempt to find out. His pessimistic conclusion can be guessed from the fact that he originally planned to call his book 'The *Abuses* of Literacy.'

That pessimism about what people do with media was not auspicious for the era of television that was just beginning. No-one thought that a new 'literacy' needed to be taught to exploit the potential of electronic media. For most observers, watching TV was thought to be a form of behaviour, learnt unconsciously as part of the formation of the self. Experts worried about what sort of behaviour was being encouraged. Where 'media literacy' was taught in schools, it was often justified as an antidote to the power of the media; the idea was to beat them, not join them.

So there was no widespread demand for institutional and public investment in teaching 'media literacy' on the scale of what had been needed to render the industrial workforce print-literate in the century before the 1950s. Even less attention was paid to the question of how to propagate the skills needed to produce as well as consume using media technologies.

This attitude hardly changed when IT-based media came along, not least because computer skills were often taught in different departments for different purposes. So the era of consumer-created content in digital social networks crept up on education unawares. Still many education authorities respond to its challenge by blocking access to

any popular sites in schools. And so a whole new literacy is developing in the marketplace. The ‘Hoggart’ question has become relevant again: what are people doing with the media and digital literacy they are learning as part of leisure entertainment? To this we might add a further question that Hoggart never asked: what do ordinary people need to learn in order to attain a level of literacy appropriate for producing as well as consuming digital content?

On this topic, we need to think carefully about what model of *learning* we take into the digital age. Will it be an interventionist and state-supported ‘schooling’ model (based on control, standardisation and print); or a laissez-faire market-driven model (based on entertainment); or something new – a ‘demand’ model perhaps, where people *learn* because they *like*, where literacy is an attractant, not driven by expert-supply and controlled by institutional providers?

‘Demand’ learning is already developing in the context of what some call ‘vernacular creativity,’ where process, technical and production skills are developed on the run; sometimes using online tutorials but more often simply peer-to-peer assistance. They’re learnt in order to perform a job in hand, via just-in-time demand, play techniques, learning by doing, in the workplace or at home. A ‘vernacular pedagogy’ is already diffusing across the net to extend the range of the social networks that are the emergent source of both cultural and economic values.

As was the case for print-literacy in previous centuries, users are influencing and disrupting former patterns of production and distribution even as they try out new ideas. As MIT’s Henry Jenkins puts it, ‘consumers may gain power through the assertion of

new kinds of economic and legal relations and not simply through making meanings.’²

That ‘power’ is to use what is currently an entertainment format to produce entirely new knowledge, across the scientific, imaginative and journalistic spectrum, just as print literacy itself did, once it was emancipated from official authority.

Richard Hoggart was ahead of his time in seeking to understand the role of media usage in ordinary life, but the educational climate of the day – still influential now – sought to counter the media’s supposed effects by imposing institutional control (prohibition) and intellectual critique (pessimism). Now that we can see more clearly how the ‘uses of literacy’ include creation as well as consumption, the challenge for education is to encourage general ‘access, understanding and creation,’³ enabling emergent uses, so that everyone can benefit from multimedia literacy, and by their uses of it contribute to the growth of knowledge.

² Henry Jenkins (2004), ‘The cultural logic of media convergence.’ *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol 7 No 1, pp. 33-43. See also <http://www.henryjenkins.org/index.html>

³ This is the definition of media literacy adopted by the UK communications regulator Ofcom. See http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/